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ABSTRACT

This lesson summarizes the most significant facts about the communist period in Hungary and briefly examines the Hungarian electoral system. The lesson is structured with: (1) background on the communist period (1948-1989) and the evolution of the democratic political system and institutions during 1989-1990; (2) description of the electoral system and its brief discussion; (3) highlights on some major differences between the Hungarian model and the U.S. model; and (4) conclusions of the lesson with additional exercises. The lesson includes a listing of objectives, procedures, materials needed, and student handouts. (EH)

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The Hungarian Electoral System and Its Political Implications.

by Balazs Hidveghi

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THE HUNGARIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

LESSON PLAN BY BALÁZS HIDVÉGHI
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(Principle Notion Discussed: The Consent of the Governed)

1. Lesson Plan for the Teacher

1.1. Preview of Main Points

This lesson will summarize the most important facts about the communist period in Hungary and will examine briefly the Hungarian electoral system. It will be done in a way that students have a chance to always compare what they learn to the American model. This will also enable them to draw critical conclusions at the end of the class, i.e. identify advantages and disadvantages of both political systems.

The lesson is structured as follows:

1. Background reading on the communist period (1948-1989) and the evolution of the democratic political system and institutions during 1989-1990.

2. The description of the electoral system and its brief discussion.

3. Highlighting some major differences between the Hungarian and the American model.

4. Conclusions, exercises.

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1.2. Connection to Social Studies

The lesson can be connected to any descriptive or issue-oriented course in American government, especially those dealing with voting participation, political parties, means of representation, electoral procedures. It can also be connected to 20th century world history classes and courses dealing with present-day politics of Europe.

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1.3. Objectives for Students

As a result of this lesson students will

- have a basic knowledge about communism in Hungary;
- understand the basic facts related to the transition to a democratic political system in Hungary which took place in 1989-1990;

- be able to compare on a basic level the political and electoral systems of Hungary and their own country;

- be able to make their own judgment based upon that comparative knowledge about the pros and cons of both systems;

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1.4. Suggestions for Teaching the Lesson

A. Opening the Lesson (10 minutes)

- Introduce the topic by eliciting a conversation with students about the political changes of 1989-1990 in Central and Eastern Europe;

- Use a map of Europe to locate Hungary (this will most probably be necessary);

- Find out if any of the students have family or ancestors in Hungary or in Central Europe (this is quite likely), and use that as a way to increase their interest. They are likely to feel more involved after this kind of informal beginning.

B. Developing the Lesson (35 minutes)

- Ask students whether they think that the US governmental system is the best in the world;

- Leave about 2-3 minutes for opinions, they should be short remarks with examples for other models. This should be only a short introductory period for the main topic (5 minutes);

- Give out handouts which describe the basic facts about communism in Hungary and the transition to democracy (handout-1);

- Students silent-read those materials and make notes (not more than 10 minutes);

(during the reading period:)
- Ask students whether they have any questions so far. Clarify any possible misunderstanding (5 minutes);

- Students silent-read handout-2 which describes some basic facts about the Hungarian electoral system;

(during the reading period:)
- Ask students whether they have any questions. Clarify any possible misunderstanding (5 minutes);

- Discuss with the students some of the questions listed at the end of the reading (10 minutes);

(an optional activity of about 15 minutes:)

- Put students in small groups, give time (5 minutes) to prepare and make them argue for and against one of the following topics:

  - a presidential model vs. a prime ministerial model;
  - direct vs. indirect election of political leaders;
  - electors vs. proportional representation.

The actual debate should take place between groups of about 3-4 students where each student should have a chance to contribute to the debate. The teacher should decide based on the specific class and its group dynamics whether to use this exercise at all and if yes whether to have more topics discussed.

- By answering the questions at the end of handout-2 have students establish the basic characteristics of the Hungarian system, and get them to compare the American and the Hungarian model with implications about the differences in the political systems.

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C. Concluding the Lesson (5 minutes)

- Summarize the major points of the lesson;

- Underline that learning about different countries and different cultures (in this case different political models) is a way to better appreciate your own system while understanding that there probably is no one perfect model.

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1.5. Background Material for the Teacher

Kissinger, Henry, *Diplomacy*
Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994
Chapter 10 *The Dilemmas of the Victors*, pp. 246-266;
Chapter 22 *Hungary - Upheaval in the Empire*, pp. 550-568;

Lawful Revolution in Hungary, 1989-94
In: Atlantic Studies on Society in Change, No.84
Editor in Chief, Béla K.Király
Distributed by Columbia University Press, New York, 1995
(all chapters)

2. Student Handouts

HANDOUT 1

DEMOCRACY RE-ESTABLISHED - THE CASE OF HUNGARY 1989-1990

The Consent of the Governed

The basic idea of the "consent of the governed", a fundamental of any democratic society, is that citizens are active participants of their political system and government. They are indeed governed but at the same time it is also them who delegate their government and who can withdraw its mandate. This basic notion in itself describes a politically democratic system - natural to Americans, however quite a new phenomenon for many Central European people.

The political transition to democracy that took place in Hungary during 1989-1990 dramatically changed the lives of Hungarians. Let us first summarize briefly those very recent events that shook the world and brought a sudden and ultimate end to decades of communist dictatorships.

Communism in Hungary till 1956

Communism in Hungary was introduced in 1948. A minority of Hungarian communists backed by Soviet military presence and active support seized power and eliminated political opponents. Shortly afterwards communist policies were forced onto Hungary and its citizens: private property was eliminated and firms, corporations, etc. were nationalized. Farmers were forced to donate their land to the state and form the so-called "cooperatives" where they had to work for small salary with no ownership. Families of noble and even middle class origin were discriminated against, many of those people were forced to leave their homes and had to live in exile for years in remote areas in the countryside whilst their apartments and houses were confiscated by the state and granted to the politically trustworthy. The political dictatorship affected the lives of everybody, not even personal privacy was left untouched. Dictatorial, communist ideology ruled in the country.

The communist dictatorship can be categorized into two basic periods: the first period of hard-line, total dictatorship from 1948-1956, and following the suppressed revolution of 1956, the second period of "soft" dictatorship from 1957-1989.

Communist Economic Policies

In the economic sphere central planning took over free enterprise and the market economy. The economy, argued communist theorists, can not solve society's problem and a free market results in huge differences in terms of income and subsequently in the standard of living. In other words, it results in rich and poor people. That must be avoided and thus the economy has to be planned, managed, and controlled. This might even sound appealing to advocates of egalitarianism, however, practice has proved that communist economic policies result in an overall decline of the economy and cannot survive in the long term.

Hungary went through harsh communist restructuring during the first part f the 1950s. The agriculture was reorganized into cooperatives. Production subsequently decreased and not long after the introduction of communist policies Hungary - once called "the food court of Central Europe" - needed to import basic food to compensate for an all-time low agricultural production. This resulted in increasing prices and inflation and growing discontent among farmers.

Since it was a political imperative to follow and indeed copy Soviet policies whatever the context and the price, Hungary also started to build and invest in heavy industry. The slogan said Hungary must become "the country of iron and steel", this however, was probably a too ambitious goal given the fact that the country lacked the very natural resources necessary to build a heavy industry.

Too strong state intervention in the economy caused a lack of initiative. Companies and management were not interested in producing good results or developing techniques since all profits, if any, were taken away by the state only to be redistributed to those corporations which did not manage to produce profits

or even produced deficits. This, along with the fact the all property including companies, and corporations, etc. belonged to the state, did not allow the economy to grow and resulted in constant economic decline.

Communism After 1956

Following the 1956 Revolution the communist political leadership got rid of its most prominent pre-1956 politicians in an effort to try and rally some sort of support for the "new" communist leadership. The basic idea behind the new political approach was to let people live their own private lives (so, for instance, people were no longer harassed to participate in afternoon communist seminars) and govern the country in a more careful way. It must be understood that the political system after 1956 was no less of a dictatorship but it was a different kind of dictatorship. Communist leaders had to make a compromise in
order to avoid in the future the bloody outbreak of protest they experienced in 1956 as a result of Stalinist policies in the 1950s. They decided to soften their approach and tried to convey an image to the outside world of a friendly and after all not-so-bad type of a communist country. This was successfully done, especially from the mid-1960s, and Hungary was gradually perceived as the most democratic country of the non-democratic block. (An often recited nickname of communist Hungary illustrates the controversial nature of this period, "the Merriest Barrack".)

While there was some liberalization in the economic and the political life of the country and life in the 1970s and 1980s was significantly different from that of the 50s and even 60s, the basic characteristics of communism remained untouched: basic political and citizenship rights and freedoms were limited, human rights were violated and the economy was still centrally controlled and dominated by the state.

Democracy Re-established

As a result of the overall inefficiency the country was forced to take huge foreign loans during the decades to finance its economy. This resulted in an ever growing circle of debts with large interests which forced the country to take new loans to be able to pay back the interests of the former loans, etc. The centrally planned economy was more and more difficult to manage, the Soviet Union was busy trying to solve its own problems (note that Mikhail Gorbachev's painstaking reforms had started n 1985) and by the

end of the 1980s it became clear that neither the economy nor the political life of Hungary could be managed by the communist party.

Political opposition gained influence quickly with the communist party no longer able and not really daring to really control events. Real political backing was no longer available from the Soviet Union. (Although some 64,000 troops were still stationed in Hungary at the time. They, however, stood by silently as the communist system collapsed within one and a half years.)

People, realizing the historic chance for freedom and seizing the opportunity immediately, took to the streets and demanded an overall political and economic reform. Exactly 200 years after the French Revolution people in Hungary (and soon in the other countries of the Soviet block) started what went down in history as the Democratic Revolutions of 1989. The communist party in Hungary was basically driven by the events instead of controlling them. A coalition of democratic groups, newly founded and re-established parties (the Roundtable of Opposition) pressed the communist government for more and more reforms and through negotiations finally succeeded in basically all its goals. Many democratic institutions were re-established and civil society (local initiatives, civic groups, clubs, etc.) started to flourish again after decades of oppression. The communist government was forced to declare Hungary a "republic" (instead of "people's republic", a term used by communist countries) and they also had to agree to hold free and democratic general elections. The general elections were held in March-April 1990 and that actually marks the end of institutional transition to democracy. The new, democratic government of the republic took office in May 1990 and Hungary has been a democracy since.

Questions, Exercises

1. Explain the basic idea behind the "consent of the governed".
2. Summarize the most important reasons why a communist economy cannot survive in the long term.
3. Why was Hungary often referred to as "the Merriest Barrack" in the 1970s and 1980s?
4. What internal and external reasons led to the collapse of communism in Hungary in 1989-1990?

5. Why do you think the Communists could not defend communism by force in 1989-1990?
6. Why is it important to recognize the difference between a "people's republic" and a "republic"?

Answers to Questions Related to Handout 1

1. See the first paragraph of the handout 1

2. - production is low;
- it does not encourage initiatives;
- it needs foreign loans which produce huge debts;
- central planning kills local freedom to re-invest, plan and expand;
- quality is not a priority in an egalitarian environment.

3. Because it was indeed the least direct and hard dictatorship among Soviet Block nations. People were allowed limited freedoms, especially in their private lives, however, the political and economic system and government was dictatorial.

4. - Hungary could no longer finance and manage its economy;
- the Soviet union was on the defensive itself and could not help the communist leaderships in its satellite states;

- strong anti-Soviet US policies in the 1980s contributed greatly to the overall demand of democracy among the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe and then to the collapse of the communist states;
- political opposition was gaining more and more influence;
- huge public demonstrations backed the opposition forces.

5. The main reason was the, by that time, weak Soviet Union.

6. Although the little difference between the two terms may not seem utterly important for Americans, it is for those people who have experienced a communist regime. The term "people's republic" is a characteristic name for and is used by communist dictatorial states. (Think of the example of the "People's Republic of China" - an example many American kids will probably be able to relate to.) The difference thus is significant.

HANDOUT 2

THE HUNGARIAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM AND SOME OF ITS POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The Evolution of Democracy

The electoral system was contemplated and developed through the months of 1989 by renowned political theorists and opposition leaders. The discussions and decisions about electoral methods, of course, had a much wider context and effect: they shaped the country and the nature of its political system. Although in some cases immediate political interests of specific groups entered the debate about some detail of some new law or regulation, the overall process creating these essential overarching documents of the democratic state was characterized by academic zeal and democratic commitment.

Parliamentary Democracy

Hungary is a parliamentary democracy and, unlike the United States of America, has a parliamentarian not a presidential form of government. The government has political responsibility towards the parliament and the President of the Republic has merely representational functions but no real power. (The actual role of the President in Hungary can be compared to that of the monarch in a constitutional monarchy, for example Great Britain.) No stable government can exist without the backing of the majority of the legislature which is a one-chamber parliament. This form of government has a long tradition in Europe, in Hungary parliament became the law-maker as early as the Middle Ages and the government has been responsible towards parliament since 1848 (excluding the non-democratic periods).

People elect a parliament (a total of 386 representatives) by voting for individuals in their constituency and political parties. Following the elections the president of the country asks the leader of the majority party in parliament (i.e.: the leader of the winning party at the elections) to form a government. (NB: majority does not necessarily mean an overall majority) The winning party can form a government alone provided it won more than 50% of the total number of seats in Parliament. (By law there can also be a minority government formed by the winning party,

however, this is highly unlikely since governing is difficult if one does not have the support of the majority of representatives. Cf. a Democratic President vs. a Republican Congress in the US today.)

The leader of the majority party then starts negotiations with the leaders of other parties and, if successful, a coalition government is formed. This was the case in 1990 when a coalition of three center-right parties formed the government controlling about 62% of the Parliament. In 1994, on the other hand, the left-wing Hungarian Socialist Party had an overwhelming election victory garnering more than 50% of the mandates and still they decided to form a coalition with another left-wing liberal party. This way they currently control more than 70% of the seats.

The President

The President of the Republic is elected indirectly by Representatives in the Parliament. (To avoid the possibility of a general hiatus of power the term of the President is five years whereas the term of the Parliament is four years.) There were serious debates and even a referendum on the issue of how to elect the President. This is, to some extent, an ongoing debate with some political parties and politicians raising the issue every once in a while. The President, they argue, represents the whole of the country and should thus be elected by the people. Also, the average voter should be given the opportunity to express his or her view this way. Opponents to a direct election of the President point out that Hungary is a parliamentary system, where real executive power is with the prime minister (i.e. the leader of the majority party) and thus it is unnecessary to hold direct elections. Also, electing the President by the people could create a conflict of power since the President could easily argue for more political role and involvement by pointing out that his/her legitimacy is at least as strong as that of the prime minister (or even stronger because the prime minister is not elected directly by the people.) Another major argument of the opponents of direct election is that Hungary should avoid even the possibility of electing any individual with a chance to seize too much power after decades of dictatorship. (This argument was more timely during the transition, though, when dictatorship was more of a reality.)

Proportional Representation

A parliament is elected for four years after which the President of the Republic officially calls for the next general elections and announces its date. There is an official campaign period of about two months before polling day. The Hungarian system of election is quite a complicated one. The basic idea is to ensure that the view and opinion of the people is best represented in the final share of seats in Parliament. This is done through, what is called, the system of "proportional representation".

People actually vote on two different sheets in the ballot-box. They vote for an individual to be their Representative. There are a total of 176 constituencies in the country so 176 representatives are elected. To become a representative a candidate needs to garner more than 50% of the votes. If none of the candidates manages to do that (which is the case in almost every constituency given the fact that usually at least four or five candidates compete in one constituency) there is a second round of elections two weeks after the first one. In the second round, however, only the first three (or those garnering more than 15% of the votes) can participate. In the second round a simple majority is enough, whoever gets the most votes becomes the Representative of that constituency for four years.

On the other sheet people can vote for a political party. There are the names of the major parties listed and below each name there is a list of leading politicians of the party. People when they make their choice can see the names of some of the national and regional politicians who belong to that party and basically characterize its policies. The idea behind this second type of voting is two-fold: On the one hand it provides an opportunity for people to differentiate between a local candidate whom they like but who may not belong to their favorite party or could even be an independent candidate and the party which they like and would like to support in general. On the other hand, it compensates for "lost votes". "Lost votes" are those hundreds and thousands of votes which are cast for candidates who eventually lose in their constituencies. Since in every constituency only one candidate ends up winning, a great number of votes end up being "lost votes" after all. Compensation, which is a complicated system of adding up and then dividing numbers, ensures that all votes a party gets - either directly to the party list or indirectly as a vote cast to one of its candidates - ends up being taken into account. Out of the 386 seats more than 200 are filled through the party lists. This means that one can indeed become a Representative without running in a constituency and fighting through the campaign. Although this can be criticized an apparent advantage is that real experts who are not really political campaigners but can help

their party in the Parliament do become members of the legislature. Also, this system does compensate minorities of political opinion and ensures their representation.

Another result of proportional representation is the multi-party system. There are several parties in Parliament because even a small and weak party which, say, does not manage to win in any of the 176 constituencies can, in effect, win parliamentary representation. (It has to be added, though, that there is a minimum of 5% limit which parties have to pass to actually win mandates. In other words, not even in theory can the Parliament become the house of miniature parties with 3-4 representatives.) A further result is the likelihood of coalition governments as opposed to one major party governing.

Several arguments for and against coalitions (and proportional representation) can be recited. Opponents of if often point at Italy where the great number of weak parties has effectively hindered the formation of a strong and long-lasting Italian government for decades. At the same time, however, Germany, which has a proportional electoral system, has had stable and highly effective coalition governments for most of its recent history. In Britain, where there is no compensation for lost votes at all governments have been traditionally stable (formed by one party), however there are only two major parties and it is often questioned whether they can really represent all the differing views in political matters. Also, as a result of the first-past-the-post system other parties with significant popular support are dramatically under-represented in the British Parliament (a perfect example is the British Liberal Democrats).

The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister is delegated by the majority party in Parliament. It is important to note that people actually vote for their individual Representative and a party, but they do not vote directly for the Prime Minister. Consequently, the government and the Prime Minister is responsible towards the Parliament. Although during the election campaign parties usually announce who their prime ministerial candidate is (99% of cases it is the party leader) and thus people know who their prime minister will be if a given party wins the most seats, there is the possibility for a party not to make that public during the campaign. This was the case in the 1994

election campaign when the leading Socialist Party insisted on naming their prime ministerial candidate only after the elections. This was done because of campaign considerations, they hoped to avoid direct attacks on and possible accusations of their nominee (the party leader) during the campaign. After winning the elections they did nominate their leader who then became Prime Minister.

This illustrates the broader question of whether it is a good idea to elect a leader (effectively the head of the executive) in this indirect way as opposed to the American system of electing the leader directly by he people (the presidential elections).

Questions, Exercises

1. Describe the fundamental differences between a presidential and a parliamentary system of government.
2. How is government formed in Hungary?
3. Can the governing party or parties be in minority in the Parliament? Explain.
4. To what extent is it true to say that the President of the Republic in Hungary is a figurehead? Explain.
5. Why is there a difference between the terms of office of the President and the Parliament?
6. Argue for / against the indirect way of electing the President in Hungary.
7. What is the basic idea behind proportional representation? Explain.
8. To what extent is it true to say that the Hungarian electoral system is more representative than the American? Explain.
9. Give pros and cons of a multi-party system as opposed to a two-party system.
10. How is it true that the American electoral system is more direct than the Hungarian? Explain.

Answers to Questions Related to Handout 2

1. In the presidential system the official head of the state is the head of the executive. He is elected by the people and responsible towards the people. However, his power is limited and controlled by the legislature which has quite a lot of power also. The two have to cooperate by law in order to be able to exercise their powers. In-built checks and balances guarantee democratic procedure. In a parliamentarian system parliament is elected and the government is formed by

parliamentary parties who nominate a Prime Minister to be the head of the executive (i.e. the government). The government id responsible to the legislature. In-built checks and balances guarantee democratic procedure.

2. Following the elections the majority party forms the government which is usually a coalition of parties.

3. In theory they can, however this is highly unlikely since initiatives of the government can easily be obstructed by an opposition majority in the parliament. If the government loses its majority in the legislature there usually are new elections.

4. He is a figurehead in the sense that he does not have much executive power in the management of daily affairs or in the legislative process. He, however, serves as a kind of check and balance himself since he has to sign laws so that they enter into force, he is the one who officially appoints the prime minister and government officials, etc.

5. To avoid a hiatus of power (i.e. to avoid a situation when neither the Parliament nor the President is officially in office).

6. See paragraph *"The President"*.

7. To ensure that political views and parties which have small support do get represented in Parliament.

8. As a result of proportional representation the Hungarian legislature is more representative. However, in terms of the head of the country the USA has a more direct, i.e. more representative way of electing a leader.

9. Refer to paragraph 5 of *"Proportional Representation"*.
10. Refer to the discussion of electing the President and the Prime Minister.